

Documentary on the Margins: Bill Stamets' Super 8mm Ethnography

An article for **Cinematograph** no. 4: "Non-fiction Cinema?"
long version (v. 2.0c); 28 Sept 90,
6895 words
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One: Super 8mm personal verite

Although sync sound Super 8mm technically fulfilled the hopes of early cinema verite filmmaking in the U.S., particularly in allowing for one-person portable filmmaking, surprisingly few memorable works used the format. John Chapman's **Nicaragua: Scenes from the Revolution** employed the small gauge to produce compelling views of the Sandinista insurrection against Somoza. And Marjorie Keller's experimental **Misconception** documented her sister-in-law's delivery of a second child while reflecting on the everyday politics of domestic life and turning the romantic birth film à la Brakhage upside down.

Given the neglect of Super 8mm sound possibilities, Chicago based documentary filmmaker and photographer Bill Stamets is one of the few using the technology to produce what I call "personal verite" work--a technology, a style, an aesthetic, and a politics of film/video making that uses single camera sync sound to make documentaries marked by the director's distinct personal vision and interpretation. In watching personal verite, the spectator frequently experiences the objective

recording of the camera lens/microphone and the subjective sense of the maker's presence at the same time.

Stamets' work draws on three different approaches to filmmaking. Like the broadcast tv journalist, he typically concentrates on newsworthy public events featuring politicians and members of the public who are joining in an open spectacle, often staged for the media. Like the feature reporter, he uses the camera and editing as tools to examine the immediate incidents in a more thorough way, getting beyond the accent on news value. Joining his journalistic concern, we find an ethnographer's interest in public ceremonies as culturally revealing events. Beyond the simple recording function typical of traditional ethnographic filmmaking, Stamets investigates and interprets with the camera, and through editing he shapes our understanding of contemporary urban rituals. The roles of journalist and ethnographer combine with the experimental filmmaker who uses film as a medium for personal expression. Stamets makes film essays which use unorthodox techniques to further the filmmaker's statement. While not eschewing the communicative function and responsibility of film, Stamets clearly is not bound by the conventional "objective" norms of most journalism and anthropology.

Although Richard Leacock, a pioneer cinema verite filmmaker in the 1960's tried to establish Super 8mm as a viable alternative documentary film practice at MIT, it was never widely adopted. Leacock and associates worked primarily with a dual system with separate tape recorder sound which then demanded the additional expense of tape stock and transfer to full coat for editing. These procedures duplicated the complications of 16mm film without providing the range of lab and other services, larger range of film stocks including negative, variety of equipment

and the large image size. Today, aside from a few fringe uses, Super 8mm is virtually ended as a working format. A few schools still use it for teaching introductory film, and some enthusiasts continue to film in it, but new equipment is no longer available, and rumours continue that Kodak will stop producing the stock.

Super 8mm sound film has some distinctive characteristics which shape the creative product. The equipment is small and inexpensive, offering less intrusion into events. Because it often looks "amateurish," especially when compared to professional broadcast news equipment, the filmmaker can be taken less seriously than the dominant media. Obviously this has a "better and worse" aspect. At times one can get unguarded access or not be noticed; at other times, one is not given access the rest of the press has.

The sound is recorded on a magnetic stripe with an 18 frame separation from the image; the result is that when a shot begins, an image appears for 3/4 of a second (at 24 fps) before the sound is heard. Similarly at the tail of a shot: the sound trails on after the sync image is gone. This peculiar characteristic (which Leacock wanted to overcome) allows for certain choices in shooting and editing to exploit its nature. For example, in his Presidential campaign documentary, **Iowa and Its Presidents** (1989), Stamets sometimes begins shots of campaigning politicians who appear briefly before their authoritative voice is heard, subtly mocking the logocentrism of political authority. Similarly, at the end of a shot, a politician's voice can be heard (e.g., "Where are we going?") while the body is absent from the frame.

Sound can also be moved and manipulated in editing; in addition to putting new sound over, a second magnetic stripe (not used in the original shooting) can take additional sound. The film is color reversal, which offers excellent original and somewhat less satisfactory dupes. The standard film cartridge runs for about 2 1/2 minutes of continuous filming. This promotes rather parsimonious shooting compared to video or 16mm, especially when close to the end of roll.

Stamets' work uses and exploits these characteristics of Super 8mm film as well as some others. Since he shoots reversal and often shows original, a kind of continual re-assessment and re-editing can take place. Periodically Stamets reworks his material, and his friends and enthusiasts always pack into his apartment for his screenings of work-in-progress. Thus he exploits the particular suitability of Super 8mm for domestic space screening. These screenings may show films edited a mere hour before the event, and then based on audience response and further filming, Stamets may produce something in a vastly different final form later at a show. Frequently the same footage doesn't seem quite the same from formal show to formal show. For example, in 1986 he showed **Powerful Fun**, a film about Chicago political spectacle, in a show at Chicago Filmmakers and the next year edited much of that footage into another work, **Chicago Politics: Theatre of Power**, which was transferred to video for distribution. Shots from his early **Washington For Jesus**, a 1979 documentary of a rally in the capitol reappear at the end of **Iowa and Its Presidents**, a 1988 piece.

Stamets' work hasn't been seen or recognized very much outside of Chicago. Perhaps his often distinctively Chicago subject matter is more immediately compelling to natives than outsiders. But a much more obvious reason for this

neglect is that Super 8mm does not distribute and exhibit easily. Like regular 8mm, a marginalized form within an already marginalized sector of the art world, it is seldom taken seriously by critics, curators, programmers, teachers, 16mm filmmakers, and other gate keepers. Few venues for independent and experimental work have the equipment to show Super 8mm in optimal theatrical circumstances. Super 8mm films receiving more widespread attention such as **Misconception**, and **Nicaragua: Scenes From the Revolution**, have been blown up to 16mm for distribution. The best known Super 8mm punk films of the late 70's had to be printed up to 16mm or transferred to video to get attention outside of the New York City punk club scene. Even as well known a figure in experimental film as Stan Brakhage, who made a series of silent regular 8mm films in the 60's deliberately intended to exploit the format's particular characteristics, eventually decided to have 16mm prints of them made, although he already had 8mm prints in distribution.

Two: Avant garde home movies

Stamets' work can be roughly divided into three categories. Some of his films reflect his close familiarity with the avant garde film tradition and are essentially personally expressive works. Some of these that I've seen have been rather shaggy dog affairs: avant garde home movies put together out of diverse footage for a particular screening with certain of the filmed people likely to be present. Others appear more determined in their organization, but remain indebted to experimental conventions and expectations. Personal portraits of his relatives form a second category of Stamets' works. These documentaries fall in the tradition of the avant

garde depiction of domestic environments and interactions. The third group, contemporary ethnographic documentaries of urban political life, comprise his best known works. The most original and compelling as viewing experiences, they mark new boundaries in experimental exploration of documentary media.

Stamets' familiarity with the avant garde film tradition comes primarily from participation in Chicago's independent film community. In the later 80's he taught filmmaking at the University of Colorado, a school marked by Stan Brakhage's presence. Stamets has also worked on the *New Art Examiner*, an art world monthly. His most experimental work reflects his fluency in contemporary art while never totally departing from his basic documentary motivation.

Public Face and Private Sphere (b&w, silent, c. 30 min, 1990). is an assemblage with many shots that seem outtakes from other works. The film concentrates on objects and events observed with considerable framing, reframing and marking of what is going on in the image. Its sensibility resembles a quieter version of Bruce Baillie's **Quixote**: a filmmaker's view of America at a certain moment in history captured through disparate images. Without additional context, we see Chicago police hustling someone at a demonstration. The construction site for a Holocaust museum appears, made grotesque by the appearance of construction machinery which seems a menacing reference to industrially organized mass extermination. From a political campaign we find heart-shaped cookies referring to Senator Gary Hart. Jesse Jackson appears at various events including a warm reception at the Cook County jail in Chicago. Mayoral candidate Rich Daley arrives at a church hall with a miserably small group present. The film concentrates on close ups of his hands while he talks, framing and reframing them. The pack of journalists

conducting media stakeouts of candidates reveal the campaigners going door to door. Again and again we attend to the in-betweens and other moments of media-staged events which will never make the news. Inexplicably we find someone taking a leopard out of a cage, and then candidate Daley petting it. Pro-Life and Pro-Choice demonstrations vie for attention along with various other protests. In front of an art house theatre we see earnest fundamentalist Christians protesting **The Last Temptation of Christ**. Further unexplained images follow such as dancers in African ceremonial clothing. There are short glimpses of a notorious incident at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago when a student exhibited a piece with a U.S. flag on the floor. This brought forth by veterans and patriots protest as well as counter protests by art students. Someone dancing with chains on appears....another image of protest?

Stamets presents a world where everything is turned into theatre, Felliniesque in its tendency to exaggeration and the grotesque. At its end the film shows people methodically popping dozens of balloons on a floor. This image of idiotic activity seems to sum up the whole. Such very isolated moments, without a context, end up playing with and also denying the goal of realist documentary. While the image content consists largely of political events, they are edited into an almost random pattern refusing any easy summary meaning.

A Lecture on the Eyeball (color, sound, c. 30 min., 1988) plays with various artworld postures. As the title hints, sound is played against vision, often undercutting it. A shot of midwestern landscape seen through a moving train window resembles a well known Brakhage piece (the regular 8mm **Song 13**) and mocks it by adding, against Brakhage's one time fanatical devotion to silent film,

musical passages from that most middlebrow postmodernist, Phillip Glass. Many shots from tv, including **Gone with the Wind** and Reagan, reappropriate that always already audible medium for film. Orphaned outtake images from other Stamets' works appear, such as a drill team at a parade and a media standoff at Chicago Nazi headquarters. We see Stan Brakhage on a tv monitor and hear him discourse on memories and hypnagogic abstractions. A blackboard displays repeated writing: "I will make no more structuralist films." Commemorating the local pro football team's success, we see a ceremony putting huge Bears helmets on the famous Art Institute sculptured lions. Sometimes the images are very beautiful in conventional terms, sometimes they are just too much, too long, too bizarre. The film always borders on having a significance for the maker, but not for others, as with shots of a courtyard while a phone rings. Is this a continuation of visual Beauty undercut by aural Reality, or does it have some other significance that we do not know?

In a somewhat similar vein, **Chi Night Ithaca** (sound, c. 30 min., 1975-79) combines three types of footage: an architectural landscape of Chicago monuments and places, night shots of assorted places and activities, and the lyrical rural beauty and architecture of Ithaca, New York. We hear a mix of weird modernist soundtrack and sync sound.

The texture of the everyday forms the main interest of Stamets' recent sync sound films about his relatives. These works are successfully low key portraits which have much good natured humor. **Boy with a Microphone** (1985, 11 min.) shows his young nephew's view of rural life including the outdoors toybox and the pigs. The child asks the family dog, "Why are you chained up?" and offers the mike for

an answer. As the kid and Stamets wander about together, we get a nice sense of innocent exploration butting against dutiful authority, as when Stamets' brother tries to get the little boy to learn a Latin genus and species name for a bird, something far beyond the kid's ability and interest. The boy with the microphone is very much like the man with the camera, a naive explorer, happy wandering about and recording things. Stamets is also fascinated with the boy's sometimes unorthodox use of the mike and the resulting textured soundscape.

In a similar vein, a loving and comic portrait of his father and stepmother, **Dad and Mona** (1986, 26 min.), shows the foibles and familiar moments of middle class family life. Dad, the engineer, gets a toy steam engine kit and happily assembles it and plays favorite songs with more feeling than skill on the piano while Mom endlessly tries to stage manage daily life. The pleasure here is one of recognition--not of course that we know these people, but we know very well that most of the time most of life is just like that.

Three: Filming culture

Stamets' most substantial body of film work to date consists of essentially ethnographic documentaries which show the rituals, ceremonies, and behaviors of formal leaders and everyday folks. Stamets views these public endeavors as theatre, and he studies the social actors for their performances. In Chicago, local politics is the favorite year-round spectator sport and journalism feeds the fans all the latest. For about a decade, Stamets has followed "the pack" of reporters, tv technicians, photographers, PR hacks and others who cover City Hall and endless campaign appearances, press conferences, parades, ethnic banquets, and hype

events. Stamets films the events from the edge--literally and figuratively. While tv news crews move about with \$80,000 video cameras, Stamets shoots with a super 8mm camera that cost him a few hundred. While others shoot the official proceedings, Stamets covers the before and after, the unguarded moment, the aside, and the unexpected.

As someone who has no immediate goal for his footage or deadline to meet, the filmmaker remains something of an outsider--a skeptical, though never cynical, participant-observer in the midst of the media whirlpool. As a result he is sometimes misunderstood by the press corps. One press regular once told me that Stamets was a nice guy, but certainly not a pro. Legitimately credentialled, Stamets works at these events as a freelance photographer hoping to sell some of the 35mm still images he takes. He also carries a 35mm Widelux panoramic camera which sometimes allows him to take an unusual shot which appeals to an editor. Yet, while part of the press, he doesn't shoot only the carefully set up "photo ops" planned in advance by press secretaries, but the event's marginal aspects as well. Without his own vehicle, he is dependent on public transportation or the kindness of other journalists to get around, and **Chicago Politics** contains a thanks to the many who gave him a ride in making the film.

Stamets would be the first to recognize his marginal status in the press corps. But it would be a huge error to mistake marginality, a position in relation to a dominant (and usually unreflectively accepted) set of norms, for lack of seriousness and intellectual rigor. Only the unthinking confuse fitting into what is expected with true mastery. The amateur, without the same investment in mechanically repeating the same routine process in slightly different circumstances, is more likely to see

anew, to actually discover something. In the seventies Stamets pursued graduate studies in the Committee on the Conceptual Foundations of Science at the University of Chicago, a cross-disciplinary meeting ground. From that training Stamets emerged with a critical sense of ethnographic investigation and an impatience with the academic forms that cultural anthropology usually takes. He is not a journalist manqué or an unprofessional social documentary maker. Rather, he is a rigorous ethnographer whose primary tool for investigation is the Super 8mm camera and whose primary medium for presentation is the audio/visual screen. In short, Bill Stamets is a significant intellectual working outside of academe's narrow protocols.

A close analysis of one piece can reveal some characteristics of his working style. First, he offers a witty observation of the event that goes counter to the event. The artist's eye captures the comic aspect which in turn provides amusing pleasure in the detail, but which also goes against the grain of the hegemonic version of what happens at such an event. Second, the anthropologist's eye looks for the patterns that reveal the whole, that show underlying structures, and also the anomalies that mark the boundaries. Third, the feature reporter takes on a certain privileged omniscience in examining different sides of events.

Novo Dextro: Purity and Danger (1982, color, sound, 58 min.) can be read on several levels. In screen time it principally depicts a clash between a small group of far Right believers (American Nazi Party, Ku Klux Klan, and America First) and people from Chicago's Gay and Lesbian Pride parade. Stamets follows some of the unfolding story: most notably he tracks the Nazi contingent of about 25 assembling and traveling to the park site where they intend to rally against

homosexuals. We see their confrontation (separated by police) with about 2000 gay/lesbian supporters and the aftermath of people in the park discussing the event.

Simply in these terms the film is striking for its interviews with the young fascists, who rarely get to make their case in mainstream discourse. Predictably, it reveals (and basically discredits) their simplistic statements, inarticulate reasoning, and bluff bravado. Against the traditions and stereotypes of Nazi military order and Prussian discipline, these professed followers seem disorganized and slightly unkempt. While giving the Nazis a voice, Stamets is blatantly prejudiced in letting some speak. The most articulate male speaks off screen while Stamets removes and replaces the camera's daylight filter thus drawing our attention away from the rhetoric and to the alteration of color. Rather than showing the speaker, Stamets frames portraits on the wall of deceased leader George Lincoln Rockwell and General Douglas MacArthur. Another roll takes another fellow framed while standing in front of two videogames with the glowing titles "Asteroids" and "Defenders" impinging on his delivery. Clearly this group is politically insignificant, yet they are capable of evoking a strong response. They have a symbiotic relation with several far left communist groups--a record of assaulting each other in public. They also have a symbolic importance for Jews and gays and lesbians.

While **Novo Dextro** interests for its immediate reportage of the Nazi-gay clash, the film attains compelling status from its analytic framework. The title, **Purity and Danger**, makes direct reference to Mary Douglas' classic anthropological analysis of pollution and taboo in different cultures. **Novo Dextro** (from the incorrect Latin, "New Right") can be considered a similar reflection on pollution and taboo in the

U.S. at the start of the Reagan era. It draws connections between diverse events and public behaviors. Because it covers events that took place before AIDS became a well-known matter, today the film refers to a different epoch than the one we live in now. However the kinds of juxtapositions Stamets creates in the film establish an analytic structure to consider attitudes toward social "pollution" even now.

The film begins with tv screen images from **Psycho** of Janet Leigh driving and sinking her auto in a pond. A shot from a moving car shows clouds of black smoke rising on the horizon--a signal of disaster. A woman's voice over explains, "violence has a certain excitement," and offers an analysis of ritualized violence as we see a military drill team at a parade. The opening proceeds through a series of public ritual encounters marking the need some people feel for dramatically demonstrating their beliefs in opposition to others'. The same pattern appears at the end of the film.

Through patterning and juxtaposition, Stamets makes it clear that while the Nazis speak against pollution by gays and Jews, they themselves are interpreted as a pollution by others. Thus the film evolves a more complex analysis than simple reportage could achieve. We attend an orderly gathering of primarily Jewish solidarity against Nazis who obtained a permit to rally in a suburban park. We also see the fascists arriving in rather decrepit looking autos. An anamorphically distorted tv news report recapitulates the resulting confrontation of Nazis and stone-throwing protesters. Next, a speaker introduces Rev. Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority and we see three America First pickets attacking Falwell as a Zionist. Then a Fundamentalist Christian parade and rally for multi-

denominational unity features an interview with a fellow carrying a huge cross: "a symbol of triumph," he proudly proclaims. While attendees sing "Hallelujah," with arms upraised, Stamets shows us a fellow with a hand puppet animal which mimes the verse.

In a section introduced on the audio track by an America First anti-Semitic phone message, Mayor Jane Byrne speaks at a public Chanukah candle lighting ceremony where the electric light "flames" have to be assisted by screwing in the bulb when things don't go according to plan. While a cantor heartily sings, the camera catches Byrne glancing off as her attention wanders, obviously bored by the affair. Another rally for Jesus shows members of a doctrinal schism group disrupting the crowd and being verbally abused. What appears to be a group of counterprotesting Moonies (members of the Unification Church) sing "God Bless America" while one holds a misspelled sign, "Support Regens Ant-Communism." Then a cascade of images shows Russian folkloric dancing, orange robed Hare Krishna chanters, disco dancing, hippies dancing, and a gospel choir. On tv Gene Siskel shows, interviews, and validates the Village People gay male musical group.

The form and politics of **Novo Dextro** raise several important questions about documentary as an experimental mode and as a means of analysis. Clearly Stamets does not feel compelled to remain in the strict observational mode of Frederick Wiseman's type of cinema verite documentary. When he rides to the rally in their open truck with the ragtag band of Nazis, clustered together, hair blowing in the wind, he adds the editorial comment of Laurie Anderson's "O Superman" to the soundtrack. In his most blatant comment, he provides a shot of the Nazis departing

the rally in their truck and match cuts a shot of a sewage truck with the words "Sludge Removal" in bold letters.

At the same time, he conspicuously avoids interviews with recognizable spokespeople, authority figures, experts, and pundits. The interviews depict everyday people and are often balanced elsewhere in the piece. Thus the cross carrier at the start is echoed at the Gay Pride parade by three Germans dressed as concentration camp inmates with pink triangles. One explains the need to make a public bodily display of this symbolism. The result is that the piece clearly has a point of view and politics vis-à-vis the Nazis. Yet it doesn't let others off the hook. While we see the gay parade we hear a male voice explaining that he doesn't look, talk, or act like a gay man, yet he is one. His need to admit his disgust with men who fit the common stereotype puts another spin on "pride" and "pollution."

This type of documentary puts the problem of empiricism up front. The film essentially stays with the observable, even while it reconstitutes the observed and patterns it through selection and editing. But the film cannot address any aspect of the situation that isn't present to the camera. Thus the historical context, background information, and contrasting information is lost to observation and left out. Of course this same problem is at the heart of any ethnographic fieldwork. But within the film there is no accounting (beyond the title) for the absence of rallies and demonstrations by liberals and leftists for a nuclear weapons freeze or in support of the Sandinistas or the FMLN in El Salvador or feminist events, although these all took place in the same time frame and would doubtless produce similar incongruous observations and contradictions.

Similarly, the historian, political scientist, activist, or lawyer might think it important to explicitly state that the Nazis were using a landmark legal decision, originally obtained to demonstrate in Skokie, Illinois, a heavily Jewish suburb with many Holocaust survivors, to get rally permits. Or to point out that in the early 70's they had a more substantial base but were discredited when their Chicago leader, Frank Collins, was sent to jail for sexually molesting a boy. Or to make it clear that more mainstream Jewish and gay/lesbian leaders and organizations counselled against confrontation and actually held affirmation rallies at different locations during the clashes. (Stamets shows footage of the suburban alternative rally as well as the rock-throwing clash, but without clearly marking the two events; local participants remember the difference.)

The film leaves its audience with the question, why do people do these things? A Black man sits with a small PA system doing street corner preaching while holding a ventriloquist puppet: "God must take the nature of man." Given the whole film, this is not a totally bizzare, laughable, or idiosyncratic moment, but its meaning is not self-evident. What replaces direct meaning is Stamets' eye to pattern. Certain things are officially sanctioned and others are marginal. Some people by ownership, power, position, or prestige have access to the mass media to spread their views. Others have the street and their voice and sometimes leaflets and a bull horn. Some people feel the need to go through certain public rituals to present their beliefs, ideas, and emotions. The film is a meditation on this social phenomenon, particularly as it exists in a highly mass mediated culture which includes the filmmaker's presence.

The events shown are compelling because Stamets avoids clichés such as the typical establishing shot of the crowd and cut to a spokesperson at a podium or in closeup interview. He almost always presents the view from the ranks and often the more unlikely members of the group. The parallels and repetitions are interesting once noticed and form patterns which seem significant. In this Stamets moves far beyond the typical reportage and event documentary. As most activism-oriented documentary film/video makers quickly learn, nothing dates faster and is harder to get people to watch at a later date than demonstrations, parades, and rallies, aside from the few seconds needed to establish that this event took place. An emotion and rhetoric which is warming at the moment almost invariably seems deadly cold later. Thus while Stamets' work falls outside the typical boundaries of the social-political documentary, it illuminates something else which is not dealt with very well, if at all, in other modes. It shows the emotional bonding of declaring one is part of a rule-bound group. It depicts the need to demonstrate belief in a public theatrical event. It represents the special state of community or threshold experience gained in collective public behavior.

Mary Douglas in **Purity and Danger** says society is built on contradiction. The stresses of contradiction bring about the need for coherence. When a principle of power or domination is applied to social life and is then contradicted by another principle or practice, notions of pollution are more likely to appear to establish boundaries and order. **Novo Dextro** operates with these ideas, but leaves unanswered the question of what contradictions are crucial here. Those of Right vs. Left? Those of anti-Semitism vs. pluralist tolerance? Those of changing gender roles? Those of sexual activity? The contradiction of capital vs. labor? This uncertainty is marked in the film by the lack of an unequivocal conclusion or

summary. As in his other works, there's a sense of the narrative just trailing off, leaving us with a "to be continued."

Four: Political newsreels

Over the years Stamets has made some important and powerful documentaries about Chicago politics. Stamets often calls this kind of film a "newsreel" and compares it to the now-defunct form with its prejudicial narration, concentration on authority figures, predilection for cheap shots, and coverage of the most public face of the news world. But the traditional newsreel always accepted the media event as a self-contained reality. By showing us the backside, the moments of waiting, the flaws and goofs as well, Stamets reverses priorities and mocks the pretense while showing the texture.

Mayor Speaks to Group (12 min., 1984), presents Harold Washington soon after his election as the first Black mayor speaking in a dignified and formal way to a white audience and then, on another occasion, telling it like it is in a wonderfully rich and humorous address to a Black gathering. The contrast reveals Washington as a consummate political actor, able to change performance to meet different audience expectations.

Powerful Fun (1986, 52 minutes) presents three year's worth of media events in a condensed way. Here is Governor Jim Thompson handshaking his way through the center of a parade, an octopus of glad handing, shot by Stamets who is shadowing the manic campaigner. The handheld camera with a wide angle view shows the marchers' surprise when the governor comes charging through their

procession with hands flying and a hearty "Hiya, big guy!" The image tells us more about the magnificent insincerity of politics than a hundred editorials ever could. The film will probably never be seen again as it was shown at Chicago Filmmakers in a 1986 show. But the memory of the moments captured remains because of their uniqueness, vitality, and insight into the life of the city. Street corner preachers, Vietnam vets, Democratic machine ward heelers, blond teens with "White Power" t-shirts, and Black teens cursing out Klan demonstrators: Stamets creates a portrait of Second City that is mostly warts and all.

Chicago Politics: A Theatre of Power (1987, 87 min.), intended for videotape distribution, uses large sections of **Powerful Fun** and adds additional explanation of events with occasional dates and subtitles. For a national audience it provides more explanation of context than other Stamets' works, yet parts remain opaque to those who don't know all the players and situations. For Chicagoans who lived through the 80s, it functions as a kind of scrapbook of a memorable period: the events leading up to and following the election of a talented Black mayor, a principled reformer.

Perhaps the best way to approach **Chicago Politics** is as a working out of some central ideas advanced by anthropologist Victor Turner, who is acknowledged in the film's credits. Turner emphasizes that in addition to the formal social-political structures of society--those most actively studied by previous ethnographers--there exists a powerful realm Turner calls *communitas*. In any society people live in both worlds. Bound into legal structures and formal roles in the system, they also spend part of their life in borderline states not bound by those rules. Carnival would be an extreme example, but everyday life provides many cases of different

states of consciousness and social being, and even capitalism's attempt to turn a profit out it: "It's Miller Time," "You deserve a break today at McDonald's," "For all you do, this Bud's for you," etc.

Turner also advances metaphors of performance and theatre to help understand both the sanctioned ceremonies and rituals of public institutions and the liminal or threshold experiences which break from established patterns. To draw from a slightly different, but complementary framework, we could think of the way leftists, feminists, and others have drawn on the Marxist concept of ideology as the underlying structure of the social order. Ideology has often been taken as overwhelming in its operation on consciousness, as in T. W. Adorno's conception of a monolithic Culture Industry injecting the public with false ideas and needs, or Louis Althusser's figuration of a uniform interpellation or placing of the individual in a specific mental situation. But such a model gives us no way to understand the kind of rapid dramatic changes we've recently seen in the most highly centralized and organized states of the Right and Left. It's more accurate and sophisticated to recognize that any individual faces a constant variety of sometimes conflicting and sometimes confirming appeals to belong in the social order. Any individual embodies, and most continually process, the contradictions of society. So the laws, roles, expectations, and obligations that keep us "in place" must be thought of with additional reference to the parts of social life that let us "displace" our formal identities. For example, strikes, be they by Pittston miners, Solidarity shipbuilders, or Salvadoran teachers, are consciously taken rational acts, but also often unleash creative actions and a new sense of community previously unseen.

While it has a preface explaining the late Mayor Richard J. Daley's iron-handed rule of the city, **Chicago Politics** works best in giving the changing mood of Chicago politics, rather like following a sports team through its ups and downs and changes during a season. Stamets shows the banal details of formal rituals (setting up and putting away the mayor's podium) as well as the city's memorable absurdities, such as a bearded King Neptune at a lakefront festival, interpolated with city workers artificially coloring the Chicago River green with dye to signal the annual St. Patrick's Day celebration, featuring Chicago's most important annual political parade. As the campaigns and maneuvering for the Mayor's office proceed we witness moments of sheer silliness, such as kids dressed up as dancing Christmas trees in a parade. And we hear in heavily accented English the political syllogism of a campaign sound truck: "People love Daley. Daley love Tschikago. Tschikago love Daley." Mayor Byrne's short-lived decision to move into the city's most notorious housing project is displayed as political theatre and media hype when matched with the Black residents' sarcastic comments.

Chicago's best known rascals and rogues are in full display here, often at their most demagogic, opportunistic, or foolish. But Stamets never lets us forget the political pressures of the times. Young whites chant, "Niggers go home!" in response to police protected Black marchers who seek to enter a segregated public park between Black and white neighborhoods. The Klan and Nazis appear again, and a Lyndon Larouche cultist warns that you can get AIDS from a gay waiter sneezing on your order of oysters or a salad.

A series of campaign appearances reveals an endlessly uptight Jane Byrne saying "hi" and "bye" at one location after another and flattering employees at a hot dog

stand with compliments on their french fries. A Republican candidate climbs aboard an elephant. He later reads a story book to children in another photo opportunity, and then he explains "there's something in this story related to the election" to a little boy in a sailor suit.

Throughout it all, Harold Washington stands out as a principled leader. In his various campaign appearances, in his speeches at various locations, appearing at a gay/lebian event, handshaking with prisoners at Cook County jail, and answering press questions, he seems again and again to enjoy his role. Washington is sometimes shown in the full glare of media hype, as in a wonderful series of him posing in a friendly handshake for sequential photos with dozens of campaign donors. More often he clearly masters the moment, as when as mayor he delivers a warm official "Merry Christmas and Happy Chanukah" to the press pack. Following up, a reporter asks if he also has a message for his political opponents. The mayor brightens, offers a cheery, "Yes, drop dead!" and walks off chuckling.

Chicago Politics moves from official ceremonies to media rituals while Stamets' eye for the absurd remains as sharp as before, but his analysis is also transformed by Washington's example as a leader who repeatedly appealed to the best in people, including his opponents, while also expressing righteous anger when the occasion called for it. Washington emerges from **Chicago Politics** as a leader who could use his formal position in the political and media structure to advance a progressive and empowering sense of community.

With **Iowa and Its Presidents** (1988, 50 min.) Stamets continues to examine political ritual, this time the Iowa primary of 87-88 with its plenitude of candidates.

It begins with a middle aged Black woman who seems to be seated in a bus station waiting area telling us she is running for President. She is a total unknown, but she has certain little pat phrases down, the dead giveaway of campaign rhetoric. But she doesn't speak in perfect standard English. We can't believe that she is serious, or will be recognized if she does try to run. Is she just playing a joke on us? Or is she a sincere but naive person? We don't know, and she disappears from the film at that point never to return, but to seem, in retrospect, no more of a fool. or fooler, than the string of Republican and Democratic candidates stumping for votes in this political pilgrimage.

Running with the media through endless and repeated photo ops, the filmmaker provides a highly edited and interpretive view of events. We really get no substantial sense of the history, development, or issues involved. But, the film seems to say, there weren't any anyway. Instead we see candidates directed by campaign organizers and press secretaries to jog, enter a mall, get a haircut, ride a bike, visit an old folks home, and so forth. Candidates are shown things to view in microscopes and cross sections of hog snouts as the campaign rolls on.

The classic early cinema verite film, **Primary** (1960, Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker), employed a dramatic conflict narration (Hubert Humphrey vs. John F. Kennedy) leading to a highly charged conclusion heightened by the two candidate's drastically different styles. For Stamets in Iowa, the candidates are virtually interchangeable. It's not even clear which one is a Republican and which one is a Democrat most of the time. Only two campaigners stand out--preachers Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson--because their rhetoric and delivery vary from the secular norm. The others seem to be summed up on their

trek for votes by Robert Dole's plaintive, "What do I do now?" at the end of a staged media event, and Gary Hart's question in arriving at another location, "Which direction are we going?" The politicians seem more like puppets than leaders and talented mostly for the fake sincerity of campaigning. Stamets ends the film with footage of the White House exterior and a moment from the 1979 **Washington for Jesus** film, his first extended visual ethnography. While a preacher rants about "the holy power of love," a full size Uncle Sam mannequin is seen with the crowd. The figure unexpectedly falls forward and its head rolls away. Frantically, a woman uprights the symbol and tries to replace the head: another hollow man needing close attention to maintain his symbolic standing.

Stamets' work contains a special relevance for the 90's. It shows that one can find new ways to use documentary media to examine current society and politics, the powerful and everyday people, the contradictions of the present with intellectual acumen, personal presence and vision, and responsible good humor. It offers a decisive challenge to the latent fascist ideology of **Roger and Me**. (Latent fascism: the problem with capitalism is the people who run it; if the heads of corporations only knew of the misery they caused, they would stop; the rich are mindless; trade unions are no protection for workers; among the lower classes, only men can begin to articulate what's wrong; ordinary people's attempts at self-respect and dignity in the face of adversity are stupid; women are always ridiculous; working class resourcefulness--e.g., selling rabbits--is disgusting, distressing and laughable; journalists and filmmakers are obviously superior to everyone else; although powerless to change anything, they can display sophisticated cynicism dressed up as naive bumbling; attitude is more important than commitment.)

Second, Stamets offers an appealing challenge to those progressives now calling for new forms of ethnography, exemplified by the recent James Clifford and George E. Marcus anthology, *Writing Culture: The Poetry and Politics of Ethnography*. These deconstructionist, poststructuralist, postmodernist intellectuals, for all their sophisticated critiques, remain locked in the prison house of print culture and the lockstep patterns of academic careers. Stamets provides a viable alternative for investigation and expression--a Super 8mm ethnography that demonstrates a profound intellectual imagination.

This essay forms a section of a work in progress, **American Experiments: New Forms in Independent Film and Video**. Some passages here appeared earlier in a *New Art Examiner* review. Thanks to Bill Stamets for screenings and discussions, to Jeffrey Skoller for his interest and patience, to John Hess and Elizabeth Cline for sharing their reactions to Stamets' work, and to Julia Lesage for extended discussions. Written while a summer fellow at the Oregon Humanities Center, University of Oregon.

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